Transport and Child Poverty – Beyond the pandemic

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Executive Summary

Overview:

This research was commissioned by Transport Scotland to explore the relationship between child poverty and transport. It set out to explore low-income families' experiences of public transport, specifically focused on the experiences of the six priority family groups identified in the Scottish Government's (2018) [Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2018-2022](#). Conducted in October and November 2020 by the Poverty Alliance, this research explored key transport challenges faced by low-income families, the role of transport in alleviating poverty alongside other public policy areas and the policies and initiatives which would assist low-income families with respect to transport as we move forward from the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study comprised of parents and caregivers from priority family groups as well as young people in households affected by issues of low income. The methods used consisted of:

- Three semi-structured online focus groups and three semi-structured one-to-one interviews with parents and caregivers using online video call or telephone methods.

- Six Transport Service Use Story Maps completed by parents and caregivers (issued through post and/or email).

- Ten one-to-one semi-structured interviews with young people aged 15 to 25 using online video call or telephone methods.

Key findings:

- Transport was an essential part of the lives of low-income families and critical in terms of shaping their experience of poverty. Transport has the potential to exacerbate the hardship families were facing, as well as being a tool to draw upon as a way of alleviating poverty. For example, accessing employment or education.

- Several factors shaped household experiences: place had a particular influence if living in a rural setting; caring responsibilities; age of child or children; and other household characteristics such as health conditions or disabilities as well as legal obligations like shared contact.

- Choices and decision-making processes were shaped by transport costs. This affected parent and caregivers as they looked to mitigate the effects of living on a low income and prioritised the experience of the child/children within the household. This required both management and planning, and often resulted in additional stress on families. For those with support networks with access to private transport, they discussed the reliance on this as an alternative.

- For families living under more precarious circumstances, like temporary accommodation or facing more transient housing challenges, public transport was important in allowing access to basic services. Maintaining engagement with services across different areas incurred higher costs and pressures to find

additional money for longer journeys or journeys that resulted in multiple forms of transport.

- COVID-19 affected families' use and experience of transport. Key impacts included reduced access to public transport as well as reduced uptake. For some, use of public transport during the pandemic was a source of anxiety due to potential transmission.

- Young people within the study saw transport as integral for access to education, leisure and social networks. Young people reported transition points, such as moving into further or higher education or accessing employment as financial pressure points in their usage of public transport.

- Policy solutions and initiatives highlighted included discounted or free entitlement for families and young people living on low incomes. Specifically, families recommended that bus travel could be made free for families on low incomes at less busy times of the day. For journeys requiring multiple forms of transport or providers, families called for affordable combined tickets. Other recommendations included staff training regarding awareness of accessibility and discrimination.

Introduction

This report provides evidence from the findings of a study exploring the relationship between child poverty and transport. It outlines the current context around child poverty in Scotland, the key aims and objectives of the research, the methodology applied and provides findings and suggested solutions on the relationship between poverty and transport from parents and caregivers and young people across Scotland.

Child poverty continues to impact on the lives of many families across Scotland. The Scottish Government (2020) estimated that 24% of children (230,000 children each year) were living in relative poverty after housing costs in 2016-19. Analysis of child poverty forecasts difficult times ahead with the Resolution Foundation (2019) highlighting that child poverty is on course to continue rising over the next five years, hitting a 20-year high of around 29 per cent by 2023-24. They estimate that this would be equivalent to an extra 60,000 children across Scotland living in relative poverty (on less than 60 per cent of median household incomes) by 2023-24.

Across Scotland poverty continues to have detrimental and far-reaching harmful impacts across communities and in individual households. Prior to the pandemic, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation state around a million people in Scotland were in poverty, affected by precarious and insecure lives impacting on their wellbeing and life opportunities (McCormick and Hay, 2020).

The context of tackling poverty has brought new challenges with the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 has had wide impacts across Scotland and the UK but has disproportionally impacted on low-income households and widened inequalities. This has included on jobs that were already low paid and precarious, changing educational experiences for children and young people and increased numbers of households accessing social security and emergency support (Soodeen, 2020).

Tackling poverty and growing inequality in Scotland will be central to the recovery from this crisis. A range of solutions are needed to help support families who have been affected by multiple periods of lockdown, self-isolation, and other public health measures. Critical to tackling poverty and embedding effective solutions is listening to the lived experience of children, parents and caregivers.

This report provides findings on the experiences of parents/caregivers and young people living on low incomes around affordability and availability of public transport. The research was conducted by the Poverty Alliance in November and December 2020 and focused on the experiences of the six priority families identified in the Scottish Government's Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2018-22: lone parents, disabled families, larger families, minority ethnic families, families where youngest child is aged less one and families where the mother is aged less than 25. Figure 1 provides an overview of the percentage of children living in relative poverty under each of the six priority groups.
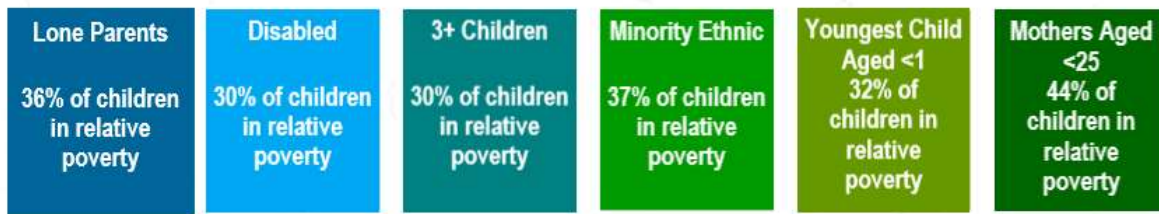
Figure 1: Priority families: Lone Parents, with 36% of children in relative poverty; Disabled, with 30% of children in relative poverty; 3+ Children, with 30% of children in relative poverty; Minority Ethnic, with 37% of children in relative poverty; Youngest Child Aged <1, with 32% of children in relative poverty; and Mothers Aged <25, with 44% of children in relative poverty.

The findings of this research outline the importance of public transport for families across Scotland, the needs of different household types, and the policies and initiatives which would assist low-income families with respect to transport as we move forward from the pandemic.

Research aims and questions

This research, commissioned by Transport Scotland, took a qualitative approach to understanding the relationship between child poverty and transport. Five questions directed the research:

- What are the key transport challenges facing people living in poverty experienced by the priority family groups?

- What is the role of transport for priority families in alleviating child poverty and how does this interact with other policy areas?

- How does transport enable families living in poverty to access opportunities, for example in relation education and employment?

- How has COVID-19 affected transport barriers and/or opportunities for families and young people living in poverty and how have lockdown related measures shaped transport usage and behaviour?

- What policies and initiatives would support families and young people tackle the challenges presented by current transport provision in terms of affordability and accessibility?

This report outlines the key findings from this study. Although it does not provide a nationally representative sample, this report serves to provide key insights across priority groups on the experiences of public transport usage, behaviour, and relationship with poverty.

Methodology

This research utilised a qualitative approach to gather evidence including:

- Three semi-structured online focus groups and three semi-structured one-to-one interviews with parents and caregivers using online video call or telephone methods (see Table 1 for an overview of the sample of parents and caregivers).

- Six Transport Service Use Story Maps completed by parents and caregivers (issued through post and or email). These were paper-based reflective tools with structured prompts to elucidate reflections.

- Ten one-to-one semi-structured interviews with young people aged 15 to 25 using online video call or telephone methods.

Researching during a pandemic required a careful and considered approach. The research identified several ethical concerns prior to beginning the work, including issues such as digital inclusion, financial pressure, and potential impacts on emotional wellbeing.

During the research it was particularly important to recognise the stresses and vulnerabilities families may face when engaging with research during this time. This was incorporated within the research methodology to ensure a robust and rigorous approach to ethical concerns. As well as adhering to the Social Research Association's Ethical Guidelines, the team operated a person-centred approach to research participation, offering a range of methods to enable individuals to be involved.

Due to the difficulties of conducting the research during a pandemic, several revisions and flexibilities were built into the methodological approach. This included:

- Recruitment was facilitated through the Poverty Alliance membership, social media and other key identified routes. Potential participants were able to register interest in participation through several routes including by text, phone call or email or through a trusted intermediary.

- Individual interviews were offered as an alternative to focus groups. Transport story maps (postal methods) were offered to support families who may be experiencing more complex circumstances such as multiple caring requirements or issues such as digital inclusion where online engagement would be difficult.

- Across the research team there were clear protocols in terms of ensuring families or young people could be signposted to support if so required. Information provided included family advice lines, information on the Scottish Welfare Fund and other sources.

- Families and young people were offered interviews at a variety of times including evenings to allow them flexibility in recognition of work patterns, caring responsibilities, changes to family life due to self-isolation or imposition of lockdown restrictions, recognising the diversity of the geographical spread of participants from across Scotland. Longer periods were allocated for engagement to allow greater time to build rapport during discussions and to discuss and highlight resources where required for follow up support afterwards.

Research participant	Age	Geographical	Household circumstances
1	30	Urban	Single parent, children aged 12 and 7
2	49	Rural	Single parent, parent with health condition or disability, child aged 16 with health condition or disability
3	57	Urban	Child aged 16, parent with health conditions or disability
4	36	Rural	Four children including child under 1
5	24	Urban	Child under 1
6	35	Urban	Child with health condition or disability.
7	36	Urban	Single parent, recent job loss. Child aged 4,
8	N/A	Urban	Young carer, recent precariousness with housing, child aged 2, single parent
9	27	Urban	Single parent with health conditions or disability
10	N/A	Urban	BAME Family, four children under 19
11	32	Urban	BAME Family, N/A
12	37	Urban	BAME Family three children under 19
13	37	Urban	BAME Family one child under 19
14	37	Urban	BAME Family- three children under 19
15	47	Urban	BAME Family- four children under 19
16	38	Urban	BAME Family-three children under 19
17	57	Urban	BAME Family, N/A
	N/A	Urban	BAME Family, N/A

Table 1: Overview of parents and caregivers

All participants were provided with a £25 gift voucher as a thank you for their participation. All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Data was stored securely and anonymously, in compliance with data protection regulations. Data was then analysed thematically using online software package Dedoose. The research team had a detailed process for coding and checking of data.

Key transport challenges for low-income families: summary

Child poverty is shaped and driven by several structural factors. This includes the design and delivery of social security, employment, and access to services such as childcare and housing. Other key factors that influence the level and distribution of child poverty include geography, ethnicity, gender and disability (Health Scotland, 2018). Child poverty results in several negative outcomes on parents and caregivers as well as children and young people themselves and finding solutions to mitigate poverty is therefore critical.

Key findings from research with parents and caregivers included:

- When living on a low income, transport was a vital part of life. Transport was required for day-to-day engagement with services and support networks including accessing healthcare, education, childcare, caring responsibilities, employment, shopping and engaging in leisure activities. Transport could either alleviate or exacerbate poverty depending on participants' household circumstances.

- For households on a low-income, public transport use was shaped by three key factors: affordability, accessibility, and individual household circumstances. All these factors shaped choices and decision making in everyday life. Cost was cited as a key issue for transport use and behaviour across this study. There were several examples of public transport costs being unmanageable for families and frequently causing anxiety. Where households had entitlement cards for free travel, this removed cost as a barrier; however, other barriers were still an issue in transport use such as poor availability.

- Individual household needs shaped day to day use of transport: for example, employment patterns, caring responsibilities, and age of children etc. This interacted with the availability of infrastructure and services and any associated access issues such as provision of transport in relation to those needs.

- Low-income households were often exclusively using public transport and had no access to private transport. Alternatives were limited with support networks such as family and friends cited as the main alternative options for low-income families. This reliance on public transport resulted in participants being disproportionately affected by issues such as availability of different transport modes, the cost of transport and timing and frequency. Other issues that influenced use included safety on public transport, disability access and complying with wider obligations such being required to attend immigration services.

- Challenges with transport added complexity to everyday life for low-income families. Decisions about transport had to be considered in terms of budgets, time, and engagement with wider life. It was important for low-income families to be able to be able to engage with services and support networks.

The relationship between poverty and public transport for families

Across the priority family types, all had differing needs in relation to public transport. The findings from this research show a clear relationship between child poverty and public transport.

The experiences of low-income families indicates that transport often determines and constraints their options in terms of household spending and their day-to-day experiences. The day-to-day issues they faced with transport were generally considered to be hidden yet were vital in navigating and accessing support and wider life. Families managing limited household budgets were vulnerable to price increases in public transport. They described multiple competing costs within budgets, of which transport is just one, including food, clothing and fuel.

Transport could, of course, provide a tool to help in the alleviation of poverty by providing an enabling role in supporting families with their daily needs for example, employment, training, schooling and access to support networks or services. However, transport can only provide an enabling role in the alleviation of poverty for families where factors such as physical access and affordability, geographical location and availability of free or discounted transport are aligned with the needs of low-income families.

Parenting on a low income

Being in a low-income household on a short term or long-term basis was recognised as bringing pressures and challenges to families. Day to day life was generally considered to be more challenging and requires a greater level of planning. Parents and caregivers in this study prioritised the needs of their children over their own needs and requirements. This included ensuring they were able to access services such as school or nursery, opportunities such as extracurricular activities, and leisure activities.

For parents this meant going without or reducing their other costs. Parents across the study reported that if they were unable to afford transport, this resulted in long walks for shopping, isolation from support networks, and reduction on household spending including on food, which for some had resulted in food bank usage. Despite careful budget management, inadequacy of income constrained choices around the use of public transport.

Parents and caregivers discussed expectations and pressures they faced in relation to meeting the needs of their children. There were reports of children and young people being unable to take part in extracurricular activities, leisure, social occasions, and other key events. The various costs involved in these activities, of which transport was one, combined to make them often prohibitive overall. This was more difficult for larger households where children and young people would have different requirements and needs. In households with older young people, this was more challenging due factors such as peer pressure.

These pressures often resulted in the isolation of the child or young person from others. Being unable to meet those expectations caused stress and other mental

health impacts to parents and some parents reported negative impacts on family relationships. Parents and caregivers recognised the importance of children and young people being able to engage in wider activities but were often unable to support this in practice.

> *"Cost of transport alone keeps us in the house, we are afraid of going out because by the time you check the money you are going to spend…"* (BAME asylum seeking family)

> *"I don't tend to go on transport for days out as it costs too much as a family to travel, it's usually as a treat to use a bus or a train."* (Single parent, 2 children, urban family)

> *"I just wish it wasn't so expensive to be able to take your children out for the day on public transport."* (Single parent, 2 children, urban family)

Alleviating poverty

For all families who participated in the research, access to public transport was essential for accessing vital services such as childcare provision or education as well as accessing opportunities in relation to employment. Public transport was most useful for families when it was aligned to:

- Scheduling: Timings of transport needed to be flexible and appropriate in recognition of the needs people may have in terms of shift work, caring responsibilities or connecting between different forms of transport.

- Cost: The pricing of transport was critical and travel should represent value for money. This was especially important when travelling with young children, where even a short journey could be costly.

- Infrastructure and services: In both urban and rural areas, multiple providers (e.g. bus companies) often operate separately. A key issue for low-income families is switching between providers resulting in multiple costs. This also resulted in lengthy waiting times between services and long journey times.

Where this was not the case, this misalignment resulted in difficulties to maintain engagement or access support services and other knock-on effects such as additional costs in already precarious budgets. Transport costs varied from household-to-household dependent on their location and needs.

Legal or social obligations

Participants in the study reported being constrained in terms of legal, social or health issues they faced. Examples included traveling with a child to maintain child contact, as was the case with several lone parents; engaging with immigration services for asylum seeking and refugee populations; attending hospital appointments; or for a child or young person attending school.

All of these activities were considered vital not only for wellbeing but some such as immigration services or child contact were legal requirements. A failure to meet a Home Office appointment or child contact appointment presented legal implications

and risks to households. For lone parents, child contact was often fixed (for example weekly or fortnightly visits). These arrangements were permanent and inflexible, and there was therefore no possibility of avoiding transport costs. These scenarios highlight the essential and vital nature of public transport for many people living on low incomes, and the reliance they have on it.

> *"By the time I pay for my fares which is 20 pound a week for two trips there and back 20 pound is lot of money and could be used for shopping."* (Single parent, one child, urban area)

Individuals in the study highlighted the significant period of time the asylum process can take. Transport therefore represented a long-term financial pressure for individuals who were receiving minimal support from the state. Delays in travel, missed appointments, or worries about travel arrangements and unforeseen events resulted in pressure on families across this study and heightened anxiety around individual legal obligations.

Other family needs such as caring were also highlighted as having a critical relationship with public transport. Several participants within this study discussed having to provide care for other members of a family and that this was again a non-negotiable use of public transport. Although entitlements cards removed issues of costs, there were still pressures in terms of reliability and the travel options available for example, having to travel in early in the morning or in the evening.

Spending and managing costs

Across this study, households' reported spending was generally around £10 to £30 a week before the pandemic, although some households reported less or were eligible for free travel.

Transport represented a key cost in daily life and was difficult to balance alongside other essential day to day living costs such as food. The fixed nature of transport costs meant there were only limited ways families could reduce them, for example travelling off peak where possible or walking longer distances. This was particularly an issue in rural areas. Other ways to reduce costs resulted in not making journeys, cutting back on other spending or relying on social networks for alternatives such as being able to get a lift to a destination. In some situations, the alternatives were the only option for families.

> *"The main barrier is price, when you are on a low income, it is hard to meet all the bills and find extra for the transport / tickets for the train."* (Larger family, rural area)

Although some within the study had access to private transport this was usually limited in its use. Where households did not have access to private transport, taxis were used in situations where public transport was problematic.

Households reported difficulties in accessing discounts for bulk purchasing travel, for example monthly passes, due to the higher initial cost. As a result, households were disadvantaged by having to purchase daily tickets at a higher premium despite being frequent users of services.

Some research participants had travel card entitlements due to caring needs, disability, or health conditions. This was helpful in reducing the cost of transport. It was discussed that without the entitlement, participants would have been limited in their participation in daily life or would have faced additional pressures in managing household budgets.

> "*It's good for me as I'm like a young carer for my mum, so I have got to pick up tablets and things.*" (Mother under 25 and young carer)

Wider issues were raised around the coordination of provision and ticketing required across different forms of transport; for example, bus and train required separate purchases and this resulted in higher costs. Greater integration, as is the case in other cities such as London, was suggested as an alternative.

The role of transport in accessing education, employment, and training

Being able to access education, employment and training were critical for households as a means of escaping poverty, as well as for general wellbeing. Transport was important in allowing people to access these opportunities.

> "*I began a college course... I had to leave home at 7am to walk across town with my child to childminder, as no buses to that area, then walk back across town to catch bus then run, on foot, to college for a 9am start.... I had a breakdown as both myself and my child were exhausted from this due to heavy traffic and late picking up child and being charged late fees.*" (Single parent, one child, rural area)

As illustrated above, inadequate transport provision can lead to unexpected costs. In the example above this included incurring late fees for childcare, but it could also mean losing shifts at work, or being viewed as unreliable by an employer. Inadequate transport provision could therefore contribute to already precarious circumstances for some families.

For families living in even more precarious circumstances, for example living in temporary accommodation or facing more transient housing challenges, public transport was important in allowing access to basic services. Parents and caregivers discussed the importance of keeping children and young people within the same school settings where they had friendships and were comfortable with the learning environment. However, this incurred higher costs and pressures to find additional money for longer journeys or journeys that resulted in multiple forms of transport. For families where children were younger and unable to travel independently, the costs of a parent escorting a child would also have to be included in budgets.

Costs of travel were also an issue for families who had young people attending further education. Yearly travel passes were costly and consumed a large proportion of household budgets.

Lack of alternatives

The importance of good public transport infrastructure and services was emphasised throughout this study by participants. Although some had access to private transport, this was not always available due to costs or other factors such as need for repairs. For others this was not an option:

> *"At present we ask favours off people or have the car on/off the road when we can afford it, mostly this year we have had the car off the road."* (Larger family, rural area)

> *"Since losing my job in 2017, I had to give up my car and obviously lost my employment income."* (Single parent, urban area)

> *"I put a post up on social media for a car share in the city, but no one offered."* (Single parent, one child, rural area)

In many cases, there was a lack of alternatives to public transport. Options such as walking, relying on social networks, or cycling were discussed. Whether these alternative options were utilised depended on issues such as on length of journey; weather, particularly in the winter; caring responsibilities; income levels; perception of safety of usage; and time of day.

> *"And that's a nightmare, to be completely honest. I actually caught the bus Friday last week, and I had to wait in the freezing cold on four buses, because the three previous buses didn't stop for me."* (Single parent, one child, urban area)

For those in rural areas travelling greater distances, they were more restricted in terms of alterative options, in some cases being forced to wait long periods for transport. Walking was often not an option for families when they had children or accessibility issues. For some, long journeys caused them discomfort and for others, children were simply too young to walk very far. Across the study almost all the families did not own or discuss having access to bicycles.

> *"Children are going to complain, they are going to go 'it's too far mummy I don't want to go."* (BAME asylum seeking family)

Stigma and discrimination

Many examples were reported of feeling stigma and experiencing discrimination using public transport. This was related to living on a low income and other forms of discrimination intersected such as racism or ageism.

> *"The head teacher suggested moving to an area 'where there were more parents like us.*" (Single parent, one child, rural area)

Racism was reported across different forms of public transport. This took the form of both physical and emotional abuse, from both transport staff and passengers. Incidents were described whereby participants were challenged over having different hairstyles, speaking in different languages, or being accused of paying incorrect fares. This resulted in stress and embarrassment to many families especially when traveling with children.

More subtle forms of discrimination were also reported. One participant discussed the issues when their child was not traveling with them.

> "*When going on a bus it seems to be okay when I purchase a child fare for her but whenever she is on her own going to school…a lot of drivers refuse to give her a child fare even though she is 13. She is tall and has been from a young age.*" (Single parent, urban area)

Being dependent on public transport for some participants emphasised or made visible their poverty. The lack of access to private transport was seen as highlighting their low income in more affluent areas, for example when children took part in extracurricular activities where other children were collected in private transport.

Attitudes of transport staff

Like many public services families access in daily life, the attitudes of staff when engaging with public transport is important. This is often the case when travelling with young children and using prams, with more time taken to board and disembark. Having staff who are approachable and friendly is vital. This is especially important when travelling to unfamiliar destinations or unfamiliar routes.

The gendered implications faced by women in travel and the vulnerabilities that come with travelling with children were highlighted. Traveling with children, especially very young children, meant it was important to feel safe when using transport. It was highlighted where staff were friendly to children this was a way of increasing comfort and contributing to a more positive travel experience.

> "*The rail staff are always kind and polite to the children.*" (Larger family, rural area)

Accessibility issues

Several issues were discussed around accessibility and public transport. One key area that emerged was communication and information. In urban areas, accessibly was seen as more effective, with electronic information points available on many forms of transport, providing real time information on services. In more rural areas this was not the case and often people were reliant on assuming transport is running to schedule and being unable to plan for late running transport etc.

For families with young children, disabled children or children with health conditions, transport not running to schedule posed several problems. Firstly, it was not always feasible or practical to be able to access alternative routes which could be some distance apart. Dependent on the individual circumstances of the household, accessing even a first initial travel departure point could take significant energy and preparation.

For some parents, traveling with children with learning disabilities and other conditions brought about additional pressures. One participant within this study reported it could be challenging traveling with a sibling as they would often shout when travelling and other passengers would not understand the reason underlying their behaviour.

In addition, practical considerations were raised such as traveling with prams, wheelchairs or other mobility aids. There was often limited space on buses, and this could result in difficult scenarios when trying to accommodate multiple needs.

One wider issue that emerged around transport was the impact of adverse or traumatic experiences on families and how this could affect their interactions across different areas of life including travel. Some families discussed circumstances where they had experienced adverse or difficult life experiences; for example, periods of housing insecurity, separation, mental health breakdown or having to seek asylum in Scotland. These experiences connected with broader challenges such as the ongoing impact of living on a low income and in turn often made families and caregivers anxious about their interactions with daily life including travelling. This was highlighted as a particular concern for BAME asylum seeking and refugee families who discussed issues with mental health and travelling on public transport, although other households such as single parents also reported this as a core concern. Being able to access support services and support networks was critical and access to this by public transport was important.

Relationship between COVID-19 pandemic, low income and poverty

Evidence shows that low-income families have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Soodeen, 2020). The lockdowns and restrictions have caused significant disruptions for low-income families and has led to instability and insecurity for household incomes. The sudden arrival of the pandemic resulted in lots of changes in day-to-day life for families and was a time of stress and uncertainty. The early stages of the pandemic were highlighted as being a particularly challenging and emotional time for families.

> *"With the first lockdown I didn't go out for three months I was too scared to take my child out."* (Mother under 25, young carer)

Families discussed how their lives had changed and the connections between living on a low income and transport. Overall, families reported being less willing to use public transport or were attempting to reduce or avoid travel where possible.

Compliance with advice and regulations to avoid non-essential travel was attributed to three factors:

- fear and anxiety related to catching or transmission of the virus
- public health advice and government messaging
- additional vulnerabilities to the virus such as ethnicity or pre-existing health conditions

Increased hardship and precariousness

It was reported across all the family types that the pandemic had resulted in increased hardship. The causes of this hardship included the loss of employment, additional caring responsibilities, home schooling and other changes in the delivery of education and housing insecurity.

Access to basic activities became more complicated, required greater planning and, in some cases, increased spending. One participant discussed the impact of this on their caring experiences. Even when support services were being provided in regard to caring, this did not always encompass the caring needs as the issues raised by a participant below highlighted.

> *"Especially when I didn't have access to my car, I couldn't go and see them in the back garden and things. And both of them were shielding as well, so it was… it was awful, 'cause I was having to pay £25 to get a taxi to, just to go and see my grandparents and take them shopping and stuff, it was… it was horrible……they got a food box each, but it was things like soup and pasta and rice and bread. And each of them got that every week, like a bag of pasta and a bag of rice. And… but there was no fresh fruit or veg, no fresh meat, nothing that they could actually turn into some form of substantial meal. So it was almost like a… I call it a student diet because it's just pasta and soup."*

(Single parent and carer, urban area)

Travel experiences during the pandemic

Families reported reduced travel because of the pandemic both because of avoidance of enclosed spaces, as well as due to the closure of schools. Some participants raised concerns regarding reduced access to travel due to the limitations as a result of social distancing.

Travelling on public transport during the pandemic was viewed as a very stressful experience, and this was heightened during the early stages of the pandemic. There was concern about the ability to social distance effectively during journeys. This had to be weighed up against the need and urgency of the journey, for example, needing to get groceries.

> "*I didn't have access to my car for three or four months, 'cause my husband still had hold of it, and getting to Asda was three buses, because Asda were the only ones that did the formula that I needed. And the other supermarket that I could get to quite easily, which was Sainsburys, didn't. So it's… it's… early doors of the, especially in lockdown was a nightmare, to get to and from places, because the buses weren't as frequent and…having to cart shopping on the buses, with a pram, was a nightmare, it was!*" (Single parent, urban area)

Enforcement and compliance with measures such as mask wearing and social distancing were viewed as critical to helping households feel safe. This was compounded by the discomfort of children or young people within households. Buses which were more confined spaces were a case of concern. Families reported children and young people displaying anxiety or discomfort during journeys.

> "*COVID-19 has put a huge barrier for our family we feel its unsafe for our children in a confined space and they struggle to wear their masks for long periods of time.*" (Large family, rural area)

> *"Especially at the minute, because everyone's wearing masks and stuff, she's a lot… she's really nervous around people, 'cause she can't see their faces.*

… and because of social distancing and all the rest of it, it was actually quite difficult to find a seat, where we could be together, 'cause of how everyone was sat. So it was a bit… a bit of a unique experience." (Single parent, urban area)

Participants felt that other measures of safety on public transport were often not adhered to by some. Some within the study reported the lack of enforcement of mask wearing and others reported that measures such as keeping windows open to allow air circulation were simply not adhered to by other passengers. Some examples were provided of other passengers during journeys ignoring social distancing measures with no action taken by transport staff.

Broader inequalities of the pandemic

The pandemic intensified existing inequalities and families reflected that their risks increased due to being on a low income. Their lack of income determined their everyday choices and experiences and for some their demographic characteristics posed new risks. Black and minority ethnic families discussed the health risk they faced and how other people on transport responded to that.

"But when it's been on the news that ethnic minority people are more vulnerable to COVID-19, people don't even want to come near you." (BAME asylum seeking family)

Families with long-term health conditions often reported avoiding traveling at all and this limited their day-to-day choices, often leaving them isolated. The allocation of one seat social distancing resulted in some forms or transport being very busy and often only available seats were inaccessible. For example, for one participant with mobility difficulties, seats upstairs were not an option when journeying by bus. Broader measures relating to ensuing access were also impacted by the pandemic. For one participant within the study, they reported their free transport entitlement running out during the early stages of the pandemic and being unable to renew their pass. Despite this they were still able to travel as the transport staff were flexible recognising barriers people faced with renewals due to closures of services. Renewing the pass took longer than normal leaving them without their card for seven weeks.

Wider concerns were also raised by one participant about the potential long-term impacts of the pandemic and the loss of routes and what this would mean for populations such as the elderly and families who were greater users of these services.

Looking forward for solutions

The relationship between the drivers of child poverty referred to earlier and transport is complex. However, evidence clearly indicated that transport could intensify or increase the poverty families were experiencing. At the same time, effective transport systems could help to reduce poverty and improve wellbeing. Several policies and initiatives to support families and young people and tackle the challenges presented by current transport provision were highlighted.

- **Discounted or free entitlements for families**: The everyday costs of transport were highlighted as a key pressure across the study. In terms of removing this barrier, participants favoured the extension of free travel or discounted travel for low-income families to enable them to access day-to-day services and engage in wider life. This was seen to have benefits for children and young people within the study who faced exclusion from their day-to-day life due to restricted household budgets. One participant suggested the value of having a card for travel similar to the provision offered in the Best Start Food Scheme where the card was pre-paid for use.

- **Free times on public transport for families**: It was highlighted that at some points during the day, transport services could be less busy and rather than having under underutilised provision, these periods could be offered as a free travel times for families.

- **Specific pick-up bus:** It was discussed that specific groups of families faced challenges due to wider circumstances such as health conditions or disabilities; or other barriers that would making accessing wider transport infrastructure and services difficult such as language barriers or wider risks during the pandemic. It was suggested that specific schemes could be operated for families as was available for other groups such as the elderly in the form of specialist bus service pick up.

- **Staff Training:** Frontline customer service was important during journeys and families advocated training to be provided for those delivering and supporting front line transport provision to provide an in-depth understanding of the circumstances for different passengers including cultural differences and accessibility issues.

- **Impact assessment of changes to transport infrastructure and services:** Loss or changes to transport connections was viewed as being extremely detrimental to some communities. It was suggested that any changes to infrastructure and services should be carefully considered and assessed in terms of impacts on families and other key populations.

- **Interconnections between providers:** Using multiple forms of transport across one journey often resulted in high costs for families. Simplifying ticket structures and passes across transport providers to allow this to be combined into one ticket would alleviate some of the costs families faced.

- **Greater rural infrastructure and services**: There was a need for more joined up and extensive provision within rural communities.

Young people and transport

Ten young people living on low incomes were interviewed as part of the study. Table 2 provides a summary of key demographic information (age, gender, local authority) of the sample of young people as well as key forms of transport used and approximate weekly public transport costs. All young people interviewed identified their ethnicity as White Scottish. None of the young people identified having a disability and two of the young people were young carers. The sample of young people included four young people at school, three full-time students, one young person in full-time employment, two young people in part-time work alongside school/university, one young person completing a traineeship and one young person receiving benefits. Nine of the young people interviewed mainly travelled by bus. Buses were identified as the most accessible form of public transport (nearest to home) and more affordable than trains.

Young person pseudonym	Age	Rural, Urban, Town	Transport frequently used	Average weekly cost
Nicole	22	Town	Bus and train	£45
Danielle	19	Town	Train and occasionally uses buses	£35
Stuart	17	Town	Bus and train	Varies (not using transport during COVID-19)
Erin	22	City	Bus	£30 Monday - Friday
Euan	23	Town	Bus	£10
Hazel	15	Town	Bus	Varies
Claire	15	Town	Bus	£7.50
Katy	16	City	Bus but also uses train and subway	Varies between £7.50 and £11.00
Helen	16	City	Bus and train	£18
Jenna	24	Town	Bus and train	Usually buys monthly zone card

Table 2: Young people overview

Key transport challenges

The young people identified three key transport challenges: (i) affordability of public transport, (ii) lack of availability/frequency of buses, particularly since COVID-19 and (iii) negative experiences of using buses, particularly in the city.

Unaffordable public transport

Almost all the young people thought public transport was too expensive and not affordable in their local area. Daily, this often meant having to walk to school or other activities and restricting spending money on other things (including food and social activities) to be able to afford the costs of public transport.

For many of the young people, public transport was one of their biggest costs. Helen, who was doing a traineeship and had recently had to start buying adult day tickets, costing £4.50 a day, felt strongly that the costs were unaffordable for herself and low-income families.

> *"I feel like prices on the bus shouldn't be high, like that - like four fifty for an adult to get on the bus even for fifteen minutes, that could be a meal for a child. Like that could, that could go a long way for some families who maybe don't have as much money as everyone else. So I feel like the costs for the buses have gotten higher and higher and it's not done anyone good."* (Helen)

Jenna described how she often witnesses young people being forced off buses in her local area because they cannot afford the fare. Arguing "it should be affordable to travel", she stated:

> "*Like younger people do use buses and especially in low income areas where they don't have the money and you see it all the time where you get on a bus and they try and short change the driver and they ended up getting in this shouting match and then they sort of storm on and they sit down and the bus driver refuses to drive and they end up getting kicked off and they've just wasted that money kinda thing and I just always feel really bad*." (Jenna)

Erin worked out during the interview that she spent around £30 from Monday to Friday only on bus fares to take her child to school and to go to college. She said that it would work out cheaper for her to buy a monthly bus pass but that paying £56 at once would be impossible to manage alongside other costs.

> *"I probably would prefer to get a bus pass, but it's just at the moment I don't get paid monthly, so it's like weekly. And to take the £56 off one week would leave me short."* (Erin)

For young people, the costs of public transport mean figuring out on a daily basis what they can afford to do (e.g. whether they can get the bus to school one day or not). Erin was asked how budgeting for transport costs impacted on what she was able to do:

> *"Well, sometimes I can't afford it all the time, eh? So if I've not got enough for bus fares to, say, go out at the weekend, then we just have to stay close by."* (Erin)

To be able to afford these costs, several of the young people said that they restricted spending money on other things including food.

"I have to make sure that I don't spend too much at lunch, just in case I don't have enough (…) especially now, 'cause I don't want tae walk home in the rain." (Katy)

As a consequence of not being able to afford the costs of public transport, young people spoke of missing out on education, employment and social opportunities. For example, Euan, who was receiving Universal Credit, described finding it very hard to afford public transport alongside his outgoings and had missed out on job interviews as a result.

"Because if you don't have enough money, you can't get to a job and then you've got to tell them, "Unfortunately, I can't get there." 'Cause you can't always rely on lifts. So there's been a few jobs I've had to say I can't get to due to obviously getting there with money and things." (Euan)

Sixteen-year-old Helen felt that the costs of transport are a major barrier for young people on low incomes moving from school into college or work. She explained how turning sixteen was hard living in a big family stating that the price rises on buses was not thought through for low-income families.

"I've actually had to postpone a lot of interviews because of the fact that I couldn't get there because of the money issues, I had to postpone it to another day, which kinda makes me look bad. Like I'm not interested. So I feel like, yeah, to get to import—especially for a sixteen year old there's like, a sixteen year old is kinda pushed tae having to work and having to go to college." (Helen)

Other examples included missing out on meeting up with friends because of the costs of public transport as well as preventing young people being able to save (e.g. for driving lessons).

"Well, every weekend like my friends used to go out and they used to say, "Oh, we'll meet in the town, we'll go to watch cinemas and movies and all that," and I come from a big, very big family, so what my mum and dad do get like the money that they do get needs to be equalled around all of us. So sometimes there isn't… Like sometimes people get more money than others because of certain reasons. So sometimes there isn't actually money left for me to go out and do nice things like that." (Helen)

"I wanted to do my driving lessons for, like, a really long time. But then because, like, I was going to uni and stuff, it was costing me probably nearly, like, the same amount for me to do driving lessons than what it is to get to uni. Which I feel is, like, a shame" (Nicole)

Not being able to afford public transport also led to many young people feeling that they were putting themselves in danger. Several described having to walk in the dark, to and from school or meeting friends.

"Like there is a bus that I can get back. But like I don't like to spend like more money on the bus, so I have to walk. But I… I really don't like walking home like in the dark, because like the area here is not like the best like… it's not really that safe, like a lot of stuff has happened." (Katy)

Whilst the young people we spoke to were aware of discounted options (e.g. a weekly ticket), the majority had to buy either a single/return or day bus ticket because the upfront cost of a weekly/monthly ticket was not affordable. Only one young person was receiving discounted travel via a student bus pass and a young person's rail card. However, as this young person often travelled before 10am they were not able to take advantage of their rail card.

Additionally, all the young people interviewed were not aware that they could use their Young Scot's Card for reduced travel. Some of the young people did not have the card whilst others did but were not aware that it could be used to get discounts on public transport. We asked young people if they had been given any information about transport discounts at school, college, or via the Jobcentre, in one case. None of the young people had been given information or signposted to information. Euan, who was struggling to get by on Universal Credit, had not been aware that he might be able to get discounted travel through his local bus company.

For many of the young people, reduced travelling since COVID-19 meant that they were spending much less on public transport and able to use the money they were saving on other things (e.g. food, items for college and university).

Lack of availability of buses

A key issue for most of the young people was having to wait for buses, and most felt that buses were more unreliable during COVID-19. They described waiting long periods of time (often over half an hour) for a bus and as a result being late for and missing parts of school/work.

Anna described being frequently late for her college course which takes place after school. She described how she checks the 'live service' times on her phone but that the buses do not turn up on time, which has become worse since COVID-19.

> *"It really impacts, obviously, the travelling because I'm normally late for college and like there's no way of me like texting like say, one of my friends from college 'cause like sometimes my Wi-Fi doesn't work on the bus... I normally miss like round about half an hour of class."* (Anna)

Several young people also gave examples of buses frequently not stopping at the bus stop during COVID-19, even when buses did not look busy. This meant waiting for buses for up to an hour and having to leave home earlier.

A lack of frequency of buses at night-time was mainly an issue for young people aged over 19. For example, for young people living further out of the city in a town, getting home late was a key challenge. Two young people we spoke to in part-time work often had to get taxis to get home from a late shift as they had missed the last train/bus. A lack of understanding from their employers was evident in their interviews. Nicole, who often works late shifts, has to get a taxi home frequently due to missing the last train/bus by around ten minutes, spending a large chunk of her income on taxis.

> *"There was nothing, no services coming to, like, [area on outskirts of city] area at that time. Which can – which was really frustrating, 'cause for a while, like,*

maybe one week I'd get, like, four o' them, so I'm now then, I'm, like, 45 pound out in taxis." (Nicole)

Reduced frequency of public transport at night-time was a key issue identified by young people. Young people described standing at bus stops in the dark for long periods and often feeling scared. Getting a taxi is not an option because of the cost.

"But you noticed it at night, it sort of cuts down and you end up a bus every half an hour. So if you miss your bus, you end up waiting half an hour and waiting half an hour in [city] is scary (laugh) when you're on your own and it's dark. So I don't think there is enough services at night." (Jenna)

Negative experiences of using buses

As well as the costs of using public transport and issues with availability of buses, most of the young people shared negative experiences of using the bus. Mainly these included instances of threatening behaviour from other passengers as well as some examples of receiving unfair treatment from bus drivers. A couple of the young people described feeling anxious using the bus during COVID-19. Helen described often having to get off buses due to the behaviours of other passengers which made her uneasy:

"I could just be sitting on the bus and they would sit next to me. I would move over a little bit just to give space and then they would be like, be like pure shouting at me and threatening me and then I would just get off the bus and wait on another one." (Helen)

As a result, Helen often finds herself standing at bus stops in the dark feeling unsafe and anxious.

Katy, who lives in a city, described ongoing "bad experiences" with bus drivers. For example, she is regularly questioned about her age when asking for a child ticket.

"I tell them my date of birth, or it's like, I just say that I'm a child, and some of them argue back, or I'll just like get off the bus or try and get another bus." (Katy)

Anna reported that in the previous two years, there were often instances where a bus driver does not stop for her at the bus stop. When asked about whether they had reported any of these issues, young people shared that they felt frustrated and did not know who to report these issues to.

"I was like, I was like, "I'm constantly late whenever I take the bus because the bus drivers like don't stop at the bus stop." And my friend was like, "Just report that." But I didn't really know who to report it to." (Anna)

Solutions

Young people shared a range of solutions to address unaffordable transport and a lack of availability. Unanimously, discounted options for young people to use public transport at any time of the day were called for. The particular challenges faced by young people living on low incomes could be mitigated by introducing discounted travel for buses, advocated by Jenna:

"I don't understand why there isn't like a railcard for the bus 'cause I think if you're under the age of twenty-five, you're still… I know you can get student cards and stuff, but if you're not, if you're unemployed and you've left school and then you have to get the bus, maybe to go to an interview or something, that that like, I think there should be some kind of railcard, but be for buses where people under the age of twenty-five can apply to it and maybe get a little bit of a discount on the bus as well 'cause I think more people would—do use buses." (Jenna)

Secondly, several young people said that there should be more awareness raising and advertising of discounted travel (e.g. for students) on public transport and in schools, colleges and universities. Euan, who had not been given any information about support with transport costs whilst claiming Universal Credit, said that more needed to be done to make sure young people have this information.

Thirdly, a clear need for increased frequency of public transport, particularly buses, during the day, and improved availability/frequency at night-time was called for.

"I would say as well, maybe like – it probably won't happen, but I would maybe say, like, later travel for people, like, in the West Dunbartonshire area. Because obviously like me, I work in town. But if I work past – if I know I'm working past midnight, I know I need to get a taxi home." (Nicole)

"I think the times could be a wee bit better, especially at night having to wait thirty minutes to forty minutes. I mean half the time you would walk to another bus stop just to try to keep warm." (Euan)

Katy, who was regularly late for school since COVID-19, due to restrictions on the number of people allowed on buses, argued that the service needed to be improved as young people still need to get to school.

Young people's feedback on providing free bus travel for under-19s was very positive. The main feedback from young people under 19 was that they would not have to worry about money and would not have to walk to school or to see friends, particularly in the dark. Some young people questioned why this should stop at age 19 and if it could be extended young people aged over 19.

Conclusions

Across this study, there has been clear messages from both parents, caregivers and young people about the relationship between child poverty and transport. Transport provides a critical infrastructure for households when living on a low income and must work effectively for household circumstances to help alleviate poverty.

Central to transport being a tool to alleviate poverty is the importance of recognising the experiences of families and embedding understandings of their needs and circumstances in service delivery and design to ensure solutions are tailored and impactful.

This research highlights the complexity of this relationship. To bring about more effective solutions we need to redesign the support on offer for families to reduce the barriers faced. Some of this complexity arose due to the 'hidden' nature of the challenges faced by people living on low incomes when accessing transport.

Within this study, parents and caregivers raised issues with scheduling, infrastructure and services and affordability of transport. Families emphasised there was a need to recognise the importance of transport for accessing and participating in schooling for children, childcare, work, wider caring responsibilities, and support services. Legal obligations for example engaging with immigration services or shared child contact meant transport was critical in being able to adhere to these commitments. Transport issues could intensify or exacerbate existing circumstances within families such as isolation and pressurised household budgets.

For young people within this study, transport was a key part of their daily lives, from engaging in education to leisure and seeing family and friends. Young people reported transitions points such as moving into further or higher education or accessing employment as financial pressure points in their usage of public transport. Support mechanisms such as discounted travel on offer to students should be better advertised alongside increased frequency of transport at specific points in the day.

Solutions to help alleviate poverty raised by families utilising transport within this study suggested approaches such as discounted travel for families, integrated provision of tickets across different suppliers and types of provision as well as improvements to rural infrastructure and services.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought new challenges to low-income and exacerbated existing challenges in relation to accessing public transport. Social distancing measures and the fears of the virus resulted in reduced usage or reduced transport access and further marginalisation of families. Going forward, the issues and solutions outlined amongst participants in this study indicates where low-income families need change. To tackle this will require a holistic approach, drawing upon the insights of those with lived experience and co-designing effective solutions to reflect their needs.

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